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The diary of Tenente Manuel de Jesus Pires and Oporto's historic ties to East Timor

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Tenente Manuel de Jesus Pires was born in the Freguesia da Campanha (Cedofeita), Conselho e Bairro Oriental of the district of Oporto, on the 6th of March 1895.

Tenente Pires began his military carreer as a volunteer of the Infantry Regiment having been incorporated on the 10th of January 1914. He served distinguishedly in WWI and fought in France. He travelled to East Timor where he arrived on the 25th of September 1919, eventually married a Timorese woman, Maria Helena da Silva of Viqueque and remained for the rest of his life.

Tenente Pires served as military commander in various parts of East Timor and began his adminstrative carreer in 1931.

After the Japanese invasion of East Timor, Tenente Pires refused to be evacuated along with other Portuguese and East Timorese, including his family, to Australia. When asked by Colonel Castilho, the then head of the Geographic Mission, in the evacuation site at Beaço beach, why he wished to stay when all was apparently lost, he replied that he was staying because of the "honour and glory of Portugal".

He was later evacuated in an American submarine along with the last Australian commandos. Although in relative safety he refused to remain in Australia, haunted by the suffering inflicted on the East Timorese who remained in East Timor at the hands of the Japanese.

Whilst in Australia, Tenente Pires wrote several letters to Salazar, holding him personally responsible for the dying and starving Timorese in East Timor and rebuking him for his neutrality policy and passiveness regarding the Japanese invasion of East Timor.

He attempted desperately to convince the Australian armed forces to provide a mission for his return to East Timor. He even offered to parachute into East Timor, although it was strictly denied by the Australians because of his age. After many such refusals he befriended Dutch and American officers and wrote to US General Douglas McCarthur requesting a submarine which would take him back to East Timor. It was only after General McCarthur favourably responded by placing a submarine and its crew at his disposal that the Australians finally relented and agreed to intelligence operation Lagarto, which he would lead.

Tenente Pires travelled to East Timor with the Lagarto reconnaissance mission in the same American submarine which had previously evacuated him.

Tenente Pires was eventually captured by the Japanese and it has been told that his capture was a consequence of his refusal to fire at the Timorese of the so called "coluna negra" who had allied themselves with the Japanese and had been used to surround Tenente Pires, the other Timorese and Australians travelling with him.

Australian Jim Ellwood, one of the few surviving members of the captured party has recounted vividly the mistreatment inflicted upon them after being captured by the Japanese, which eventually led to the death of Tenente Pires during torture.

Although there is an abundance of stories associated with this, Tenente Pires' body was never found, although his children, in particular Manuel (now residing in Australia after seeking refuge there for the 2nd time in his life) have exhausted all seeming possibilities of discovering his burial site. The last attempt to do this occured in Australia during the visit of a Japanese ex-serviceman who served in East Timor and remembered Tenente Pires.

The story of Tenente Pires is symbolic of a side of Portuguese colonialism which is seldom told. It is a story that speaks of an almost forgotten age of honour, respect and the camarederie and total dedication which some illustrious children of Portugal partook with their fellow Timorese.

This paper will examine the life and death in East Timor of Oporto's son Tenente Pires up to WWII. His diary is an imporant testimony of Portuguese perception of East Timor at that time, together with the correspondence which he exchanged with some notable personalities of the period.

The Jornadas of the Oporto University and the other initiatives which have been established by the North of Portugal are really an extenssion of great acts and deeds of notable men such as Tenente Pires, advogado, Cal Brandão and so forth and follow a long history between the North and East Timor.